

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Claims 1 - 20. (Cancelled)

21. (Currently Amended) A process for acid-catalyzed hydrolysis of a carboxylic ester to the corresponding carboxylic acid and alcohol hydrolysis products in the presence of water, comprising

introducing carboxylic ester and water into a first prereactor containing a hydrolysis catalyst which hydrolyzes the carboxylic ester at least partly to hydrolysis products,

removing a reaction mixture from the first prereactor and introducing at least a portion thereof into a reactive distillation column containing a hydrolysis catalyst which further converts a water-containing carboxylic ester stream to carboxylic acid and alcohol, and simultaneously at least partly separating the water-containing carboxylic ester stream into components thereof, mixture(s) comprising compounds of low volatility and low-boiling carboxylic ester being removed at least partly as a distillate from an upper rectification zone of the reactive distillation column and/or an accompanying condensation system, and

collecting less volatile compounds at least partly as a bottom fraction from the reactive distillation column which is passed into a further distillation column, wherein aqueous carboxylic acid from the bottom fraction or from the lower rectification zone of the distillation column is mixed with further carboxylic ester and directed to a second prereactor containing a hydrolysis catalyst, and a reaction mixture is removed from the second prereactor and passed at least partly into the reactive distillation column.

22. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein aqueous carboxylic acid from the bottom fraction or from the lower rectification zone of the distillation column is mixed with a separately fed carboxylic ester stream or carboxylic ester-containing stream and fed to the second prereactor.

23. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein a distillate of the reactive distillation column comprising carboxylic ester which is yet to be converted to hydrolysis products is fed at least partly back to the first prereactor.

24. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein aqueous carboxylic acid from the bottom fraction or from the lower rectification zone of the distillation column is mixed with distillate of the reactive distillation column comprising carboxylic ester which is yet to be converted to hydrolysis products, and the resulting mixture is subsequently fed to the second prereactor.

25. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein an aqueous, hot carboxylic acid stream from the bottom fraction or from the lower rectification zone of the distillation column is utilized for heating the stream comprising carboxylic ester to be mixed therewith.

26. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein the reaction product from the second prereactor is fed in below the reaction zone and above the lower rectification zone or in the upper third of the lower rectification zone of the reactive distillation column.

27. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein carboxylic ester is selected from the group consisting of methyl and ethyl formate, methyl, ethyl, propyl, isobutyl and tert-butyl acetate, methyl and ethyl propionate and methyl, ethyl and propyl butyrate.

28. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein the inlet stream to the first prereactor comprises an azeotrope of the carboxylic ester with the corresponding alcohol.

29. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, wherein low boilers are at least partly removed from the distillate of the reactive distillation column.

30. (Previously Presented) The process of claim 21, which is operated continuously.

31. (Previously Presented) An apparatus for acid-catalyzed hydrolysis of a carboxylic ester to the corresponding carboxylic acid and the corresponding alcohol in the presence of water by the process of claim 21, comprising

- a) a first prereactor containing a hydrolysis catalyst and having at least one inlet line for receiving one or more fluid streams comprising the carboxylic ester and water, and also at least one outlet for removing a reaction mixture therefrom,
- b) at least one heating apparatus for heating the inlet stream to the first prereactor, heating the first prereactor, or both,
- c) a second prereactor containing a hydrolysis catalyst and having at least one inlet for a fluid stream comprising at least partly aqueous carboxylic acid from a bottom fraction or a fraction of a lower rectification zone of a distillation column, said fluid stream also mixed with a carboxylic ester stream, and at least one outlet,
- d) a reactive distillation column comprising a catalyst zone containing hydrolysis catalyst and having an inlet connected to the first prereactor and an inlet connected to the second prereactor, the catalyst zone being disposed between a lower rectification zone and an upper rectification zone,
- e) an outlet line attached at the distillation head of the reactive distillation column for removing the top fraction or a purge,
- f) a distillate line connected to the outlet line, or to the upper rectification zone of the reactive distillation column, or to a condensation system associated with the reactive distillation column for removing distillate,

- g) a bottoms line attached proximate the distillation bottom of the reactive distillation column for removing a reactive distillation bottom fraction,
- h) a distillation column having a lower rectification zone and an upper rectification zone for treating a reactive distillation bottom fraction to remove aqueous carboxylic acid as a distillation bottom fraction, and having said bottoms line as an inlet,
- I) a recycle line conducting a fraction of aqueous carboxylic acid withdrawn from the lower rectification zone of the distillation column or an outlet stream therefrom, the recycle line forming an inlet to the second prereactor, mixed with a carboxylic ester feed to the second prereactor.

32. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the recycle line is connected to a carboxylic ester stream upstream of entry into the second prereactor.

33. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the distillate line conducts carboxylic ester from the reactive distillation column to an inlet of the first prereactor or to a process feed thereto.

34. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 33, wherein the distillate line withdraws unconverted carboxylic ester from a lower half of the upper rectification column of the reactive distillation column.

35. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the recycle line is connected, upstream of entry into the second prereactor, to the distillate line.

36. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the reactive distillation column has an inlet for a feed stream from the first prereactor in the upper third of the catalyst zone, or above the catalyst zone and below the upper rectification zone.

37. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the reactive distillation column has an inlet for a feed stream from the first prereactor below the catalyst zone and above the lower rectification zone, or in the upper third of the lower rectification zone.

38. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the reactive distillation column has an inlet from the second prereactor below the catalyst zone and above the lower rectification zone, or in the upper third of the lower rectification zone.

39. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the hydrolysis catalysts in the first prereactor or second prereactor are each independently, beds of a fixed catalyst, structured catalyst packings, or are circulated or fluidized.

40. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 31, wherein the hydrolysis catalyst in the reactive distillation column is a bed of a solid catalyst, a structured catalyst packing, or is arranged on distillation trays and in the downcomers of a tray column.